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# The Nation as Corporation: British Colonialism and the Pitfalls of Postcolonial Nationhood in Nigeria

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# The Nation as Corporation: British Colonialism and the Pitfalls of Postcolonial Nationhood in Nigeria

## Abstract

This article re-examines the British colonial policy of indirect rule in Nigeria. Moving away from extant scholarly attention on this colonial policy that focuses on governance through local or native authorities, we focus rather on British colonial rule through imperial companies. We argue that the British colonist did not conceive of or organize “Nigeria” as a “nation”, rather it was administered as a business enterprise in which the Crown depended on companies to “govern” its Nigerian colonies. Accordingly, the idea of the nation as a business enterprise defined its subjects and resources in ways that produced problematic notions of nationhood imagined in corporate terms. The net effect of this dimension of indirect rule through imperial companies is that “Nigeria” has remained imagined and governed not as a nation-state but as a corporation. We suggest that the challenges of postcolonial nationhood in Nigeria derive impetus largely from this conception and management of colonial Nigeria as a corporation. Our aim is to conceptualize the colonial corporatization of Nigeria, and describe the ensuing patterns of violent relations in its postcolony.

**Keywords:** *British Colonialism, Nigeria; Indirect Rule; Corporations; Postcolonial violence; Nationhood*

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## **The Nation as Corporation: British Colonialism and the Pitfalls of Postcolonial Nationhood in Nigeria**

**Benjamin Maiangwa, Muhammad Dan Suleiman,  
and Chigbo Arthur Anyaduba**

The aim of this article is to rethink a less theorized aspect of the British colonial model of “Indirect Rule” used to administer Nigeria. The commonplace understanding of this policy in Nigeria and elsewhere is that the British collaborated with, and used, “native aliens” (Ochonu, 2014) or “Indigenous” regional chiefs as conduits for governing the colonies (Lange, 2009). In the Nigerian context, scholars suggest that the British adopted this policy because it was a convenient and inexpensive administrative model. The understanding is also that a coterie of British administrators, beginning with Lord Frederick Lugard, was to maximize the revenues from their colonies in order to cover the cost of governance (Berry, 1992). This view of the policy of indirect rule gives the impression that Nigeria, as a colonial creation, was essentially born out of the fusing together of previously sovereign peoples. That is, colonialism as the basis of Nigerian nationhood was only an indirect form of governance in which the colonizer governed Nigerian peoples through existing local authorities.

The British Crown governed its conquered colonial territories through multiple systems of appointed authorities; some of these authorities came from existing political structures in the colonies. For example, largely due to the activities of the ruling Sokoto Islamic Caliphate in the region before the advent of the British (Richens, 2009), Northern Nigeria had centralized governing systems with a reputation for their bureaucratic, administrative, and judicial institutions. Indeed, the Fulani ruling class in the North, which established the Caliphate in the early nineteenth century under the leadership of the Islamic reformer Uthman dan Fodio, was successful in countering the Mahdist revolt of Satiru in 1906, a revolt that the British struggled to contain (Bayart, 2009; Falola, 2009). The British found, therefore, some pre-existing political structures useful for colonial control in the region. In other parts of Nigeria, such as some regions in the South—where the kinds of centralized political systems present in the North were lacking—the British instituted authorities, usually in the form of warrant chiefs (see Afigbo, 1972, 1967). As in the North, these so-called local authorities became incorporated as colonial agents used to collect taxes and levies, to communicate with subjects, to give rewards and punishment, and to assemble labor for the colonist’s projects (Falola, 2009). This way of using

local Indigenous authorities allowed the British to avoid the financial, logistical, and administrative burden of ruling the colony directly. Thus, Richens (2009) described this system of indirect rule as “colonialism on the cheap” (p. 5).

The foregoing perspective of British indirect rule policy in Nigeria through the agency of “native” rulers has been extensively covered in the literature (see, for example: Berry, 1992; Mamdani, 1997; Lange, 2009; Gerring, Ziblatt, DVan Gorp, & Arévalo, 2011; Falola, 2011; Ochonu, 2014; Yahaya, 2016). Our thesis departs from this body of literature that focuses on colonial intermediaries—sub-colonials—in the “(un)making” of Nigeria (Ochonu, 2014). Some of the literature on colonial indirect rule gives the impression that the British colonial project in Nigeria was one of nation-building, in which the quest to reduce governing costs led to the use of local rulers to govern. The assumption is that the major problem with the British colonial nation-building project in Nigeria is the way in which the colonizer cobbled together different ethnic nationalities into a multiethnic state—a multiethnic condition believed to sponsor diverse structures of postcolonial violence. What we offer here, therefore, is a rethinking of the so-called British colonial indirect rule policy by tracing its origins in the Nigerian context to the Crown’s grant of charter rights to, and subsequent rule through, imperial companies around the Benue and Niger areas. We argue that consideration of colonial indirect rule in Nigeria must begin not with Governor Frederick Lugard’s pronouncement of such a policy in the early twentieth century, but with the prior imperial use of companies to secure and govern territories. This consideration reveals the corporate ideology underpinning the creation of Nigeria. The idea of the nation-state as a colonial corporation calls attention to some of the basic conditions of violence in the Nigerian postcolony. We use the postcolony, as Mbembe (2001) did, to suggest not just “a given historical trajectory—that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves,” but also “a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery that [...] constitute a distinctive regime of violence” (p. 102). In this sense, the postcolony signifies both a historical process and a condition of violence.

This article will focus on British indirect rule policy by overseas companies, such as the Royal Niger Company (RNC) and the United African Company (UAC). Other imperial British companies that operated in Nigeria include the United Trading Company (UTC), African Timber and Plywood Company (ATP), John Holt (JH), Paterson Zochonis (PZ), and Thomopoulos (Adeyeri & Adejuwon, 2012; Falola, 2009). Indeed, commerce constituted a central feature of

the British Empire (Johnson, 2007), “given the degree to which that empire relied upon non-state actors for both its economic and its infrastructural foundations” (Stern, 2013, p. 27). One of the general features of colonial governance, at least in the early period, was “the habit of delegating sovereignty to concessionary companies, sometimes over a period of decades” (Bayart, 2000, p. 241). Nigeria’s trade in palm oil, palm kernels, and peanuts made the region a lucrative economic attraction site for the British (Falola, 2009). Johnson (2007) contends that the attraction of West Africa in terms of trade and produce, and its strategic location in the Atlantic seaboard, gave impetus to British interest in Nigeria. It is no surprise, therefore, that the British in colonial Nigeria tried to fend off interest in the region from France after the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, in what Lugard perceived as the “French crisis.” This crisis informed his amalgamation of all British corporate interests in the region into one entity by January 1, 1900 (Lugard, 1919). After this amalgamation, the British continued to rely on overseas companies to “govern” not just Nigeria, but also to integrate most of their colonies in Africa into capital markets (Bayart, 2009).

Contrary to the argument made in most of the literature: that the British created a nation (Nigeria) with the amalgamation policy of 1914, our argument is that there was never a nation in the first place. This is because British colonialism did not conceive nor organize as a nation, the place known today as Nigeria. Rather, the colonial project administered Nigeria as a corporatized entity. This colonial practice was not unique to Nigeria. India and many other British colonies were also governed as company-states (Stern, 2011). As a company-state, the colonial Crown’s aim was “to bind a multitude of people together into a legal singularity, an artificial person that could maintain common rights, police community standards and behaviour, and administer over and on behalf of the collectivity” (p. 7). Conceptualizing the colonial state in Nigeria as a company-state suggests that the colonizer imagined colonized peoples more as corporate “entities” than as national groups. The net effect of this colonial corporatization of political, economic, and social life was that Nigeria as a corporate colonial creation has remained imagined and governed not as a nation but as an industrial corporate entity.

We are by no means suggesting here that there are set standards for administering a nation, as against managing business enterprises. We are rather calling attention to the ideological underpinnings of British colonial state creation and the continued impacts of this colonial ideology, especially regarding violence in the Nigerian postcolony. From this, we

suggest that the challenges of postcolonial nationhood in Nigeria derive impetus largely from this corporatized conception of colonial Nigeria.

This paper does not merely make a case for thinking about British colonial indirect rule in Nigeria as a corporate rule. The originality of the paper lies in its illustration of how colonial corporate governance in Nigeria carried into the postcolony, constituting a basic engine of violence. Thus, we identify three violent phenomena in Nigeria in recent years resulting from this colonially-engendered corporate ideology—namely, militancy agitations, political corruption, and ethnoreligious crises. Therefore, considering these socio-political challenges emanating from a corporate ideology, we propose a re-imagination of the terms of statehood based on the notion of a nation as opposed to a notion of corporation.

The rest of the article is organized as follows: the first section will debate rival explanatory frameworks such as the greed-grievance model, state failure thesis, human needs theory, primordialism, and the instrumentalist thesis. The next section examines the conception of British colonial indirect rule by companies. This is followed by an exploration of the impacts of this colonial corporate governance on the Nigerian postcolony. The concluding section offers our vision for moving forward, away from the challenges of corporatized nationhood in postcolonial Nigeria.

### **Rival Explanatory Frameworks**

While we fault the corporatization of Nigeria as part of the problem that birthed violent conflicts and corruption in Nigeria's postcolony, some conflict and corruption scholars would argue that factors other than colonialism could even more convincingly explain these vices in Nigeria. Thus, we will begin by debating the extent of applicability of other competing theories that have been used to account for the vices of corruption and violent conflicts in postcolonial Africa.

One of these theories is “primordialism” or the “ancient hatred” theory. Primordialists would argue that ethnic identity is a fixed characteristic of individuals and groups because ethnic group identities flow from an extended kinship bond, sharing common behaviors, and transmitting basic norms and customs across generations (Porto, 2008, p. 58). The main assumption of the primordial explanation of ethnic or communal conflicts is that such kinds of conflicts are unique and are unconnected to the socio-political or economic realities of people. An example of this primordialist thinking regarding violence in Africa may be found in *Africa*

*Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* by Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz. Chabal and Daloz (1999) argued that ethnic conflicts in Rwanda, Mozambique, and Sierra Leone illustrate the barbarity and savagery of the partisans of such conflicts (p. 82). The authors also claimed that African conflicts are partly inspired by the superstitious beliefs of the inhabitants of that continent who tend to prioritize the irrational level in their everyday life (p. 63). In a rebuttal of Chabal and Daloz's explanation of ethnic conflicts in Africa, Mkandawire (2008) argued that such kinds of reductionist and exclusionary thinking "takes historical continuity and cultural relativism to absurd extremes" (p. 108). Apart from the fact that the nature of African violence is not unique but rather normative of violence in other parts of the world, reducing African violence to primordial irrationalism fails to take seriously consideration of organized violence as rational act.

Another theory is the econometric "greed" explanation advanced by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) argued that conflict, particularly civil wars in Africa, are caused by the prevalence of primary resources such as oil or diamonds, which provide the context for corruption, bad governance, greed, and precipitate popular grievance and frustration. They maintained that the availability of finance through the export of primary commodities makes rebellion tenable and attractive to warlords and their supporters (p. 588). The econometric model provided rationale for international assistance and intervention by international institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the United Nations (Hutchful & Aning, 2004, p. 201). Such a possibility of international intervention further counters the primordialist claims of African violence as resulting from irrational devotion to ancient tribal hatred, since African violence may be understood as products of economic competition.

Yet, to a significant extent, as Keen (2012) noted, the economic greed explanation of anti-state rebellion is "politically convenient" (p. 758) for existing politico-economic institutions. This economic greed model unduly privatizes collective rebellion instead of correctly politicizing it. The model delegitimizes rebellion and absolves state structures and global institutions from conditions leading to rebellion, as if the state and similar global political structures have no role to play in the existence of subaltern resistance.

Furthermore, there is the "instrumentalist" or the "elite mobilization" theory. The mobilization theory explains how political processes are "crucial to shaping how and when

cultural differences are emphasized” (Ross, 2001, p. 236). The mobilization theory attributes the sources of intercommunal conflicts to the manipulation or essentialization of cultural identities, symbols, memories, and rituals by elite entrepreneurs (Bräuchler, 2015, p. 13). The instrumentalization or mobilization of identity by politicians or local elites “presupposes that more than an immutable factor, identity is amenable to social construction and manipulation and is therefore influenced by the same patterns that characterize group mobilization at other levels and for different purposes” (Porto, 2008, p. 58).

There is also the state-failure theory, which views communal conflicts as an outcome of the state’s inability or incapacity to provide basic goods and services and security for its citizens. Rotberg (2002) argued that states fail when they are unable to provide basic security and political goods to their citizens, including education, healthcare, infrastructure, employment opportunities, and a legal framework for law and order (p. 87). The state failure theory is closely related to Burton’s (1990) Human Needs explanation of conflicts, which holds that the lack of fulfilment of certain needs of safety, identity, culture, freedom, self-esteem, and justice may result in conflict.

However, the problem with the state failure and human needs theses is that they do not explain why in a context where many groups lack requisite political goods and services and human needs, only few groups of people use violence to seek redress and fulfil their needs. Moreover, the human needs and state failure explanations of violent conflicts also beg the question, especially in the African context: if rebel groups or certain members of a disadvantaged community used violent means to demand social justice, good governance, and basic goods and services that they deserve, why do they not provide these goods and services to their population after they attained political power (Maiangwa, 2017).

In a way then, the foregoing theoretical approaches, which also flirt with a dangerous and incorrect stereotype of Africa’s socio-political space and life as inherently ridden with social vices and violence, only offer incomplete analyses of the nature of violence in Nigeria’s postcolony. What we intend to conceptualize in this paper is the authenticity of the historical trajectory of the logic of violence in Nigeria’s postcolony. Ultimately, our claim is that the order of violence in Nigeria’s postcolony derives from a long history of corporate governmentality in which the idea of the nation is yoked to commerce.



## The “Nation” as Corporation

How did imperial corporate bodies become the conduit of a variant of colonial rule? That is, what was the reality of corporatizing and privatizing colonial governance through colonial companies like the Royal African Company (RAC) and later the RNC, and by 1929 the UAC? In Stern’s (2008) conceptualization of the colonial company-state with regards to the East India Company, there were three processes in which colonial company sovereignty—that is, company rule or rule through companies—became cemented in the colonies. It started with the granting of English Crown charters, and was followed by treaties, contracts and (oftentimes) violent encounters between companies and natives. Finally, it led to the actual commercial monopoly and political behavior of imperial companies. As Stern notes, this conception of imperial companies acting like states, with states, or for states, takes cognizance of the nature of national territorial states at the time “in which national territorial states did not have a monopoly on political power and in which sovereignty was composite, incomplete, hybrid, layered, and overlapping” (p. 273). In that context, the three outlined processes simultaneously opened the trade to companies, allowed them to cultivate diplomatic relationships with indigenes, and the protection of passage and settlement, and eventually allowed colonial companies to “claim a sort of just proprietorship” in the colonies.

We take each of these processes in turn. On the first process of granting charter rights to companies, it is important to refer to a distinction between *informal* and *formal* colonial rule. Gallagher and Robinson (1953) argued that British statesmen favored informal rule in which expansion took place “without the exercise of direct political control over the area concerned” (see Gallagher & Robinson, 1953; cited in Hopkins, 1968, p. 581). Additionally, we note that corporate merchants, as was the case for the East India Company, consistently stated their intention not to govern colonies (The Economist, 2011). However, “as rival state companies tried to muscle in on their business,” these merchants decided to take huge colonial territories under their direct political control in order to protect their commercial interests.

To understand the corporatized governance model of the Nigerian colonial state, following in Stern’s (2008) conceptualization, one must consider the granting of charter rights to companies such as the RNC by the English Crown. This granting of charter rights to companies served dual purposes. First, it served the purpose of political expediency of, in this case, imperial Britain’s intention to avoid direct/formal control. Second, it served the purpose of commercial

expediency of imperial companies, which feared that a separation between commerce and politics would harm business interests. In the context of this imperial political-commercial grand stratagem, it makes sense to postulate that it was only when “free-trading imperialism met obstacles...towards the end of the [nineteenth] century” that formal British rule was established only as a last resort (Hopkins, 1968, p. 581). In Nigeria, we can accept or at least theorize that the concept of indirect rule through companies came about at the intersection of mutual commercial and political interests. Prior to formal colonization in the place known today as Nigeria, British companies with different profit interests laid claims to trade territories around the Niger and Benue rivers. The most characteristic is the RAC led by George Taubman Goldie. The RAC grew its influence through an expansionist vision that saw it claim trade territories and corporate monopoly over the Niger area. In 1886, the British granted Goldie’s RAC charter rights to Nigeria under the name of the RNC, following the 1885 Berlin Conference where European nations shared out African territories amongst themselves in the “scramble for Africa” (Baker, 1996).

As a chartered company, the RNC had both commercial and governing rights over the territories of Nigeria. The exercise of these charter rights meant that the RNC had to establish trading posts across areas of its interest and build a military force to aid its governing mandate, taking absolute control of the area. As company and government all at once, the RNC combined trading and governing functions, as did the East India Company, to “erect and administer law; collect taxes; provide protection; inflict punishment; perform stateliness; regulate economic, religious, and civic life; conduct diplomacy and wage wars; make claims to jurisdiction over land and sea; cultivate authority and obedience from those people subject to its command” (Stern, 2011, p. 3-6). The granting of royal charter in 1886 could be interpreted as the first step in the RNC becoming a form or a conduit of government in Nigeria. Put differently, the British Crown contracted a company to govern a territory on its behalf.

Although charter rights meant that imperial corporations benefited from Crown-backed monopoly, security and military might, total control in the colonies needed, more or less, local “native” support. This is where the second process of Stern’s (2011) conceptualization becomes relevant. The RNC, like the East India Company, as explained by Stern, was more or less like two organizations, having a hierarchy with its nucleus in London and other franchises spread across colonial Nigeria. Once the London-based Crown had given the RNC charter rights,

agreements and contracts with locals further “legitimised” company activities across the colony, reinforced by exclusive contracts, grants, and treaties, which sometimes involved violence and scandal. Thus, Dirks (2006) noted, colonial scandals became the “crucible in which both imperial and capitalist expansion was forged” (p. 8).

The political behavior of the RNC in Nigeria and other such companies was the most state-like, manifested in the power to exact agreements and contracts, raise and maintain armies, and monopolize the colonial economy. Between 1882 and 1884, Goldie’s company “expanded at the expense of smaller traders in the area and obtained new concessions of trading and political rights from tribal chiefs” (Pearson, 1971, p. 71). The RNC also specifically attempted to subvert pre-existing arrangements by sidestepping local middlemen (Coleman, 1958, p. 438). Consequently, this imperial mercantile tradition “restricted the growth of African industries so as to prevent them from competing with these enterprises” (Kilson Jr, 1958, p. 385-386). The Company thereby “crushed the very profitable trade of this small group of Africans who operated in its trading concession” (Pearson, 1971, p. 81).

Rather than any interest in the proper administration of colonial nationhood, the primary mercantilist focus in this Crown-RNC partnership is illustrated by Baker (1960, p. 151) who noted that even imperial trading agents were not under any obligation to send regular reports to the Crown in London, or even to their Head Offices. The primary concern of the British Government and the Head Offices was the profit made and reported by the trading agents who had the total political and commercial discretion to use any method and overcome any difficulty to bring about the desired economic returns (p. 151). Thus, the colonial Governor was required to protect the contribution of legitimate commerce by imperial corporations because it was their contribution to colonial revenue that enabled the Governor to carry out his colonial duties (Hopkins, 1968). In Nigeria, this primary profit-making motive of colonial rule through companies may explain the fact that when relations between Goldie and British administrators in the Crown Colony of Lagos and in the Niger Coast Protectorate became strained, Goldie’s “efforts to move into the interior along the Niger and Benue Rivers aroused constant concern on the parts of the British administrators... who feared that their access to hinterland trade might be impaired” (Pearson, 1971, p. 81).

Moreover, the legitimization of company rule in Nigeria involved both hard (military) and soft (treaty/agreements) approaches. It also involved the appropriation of indigenes into the

corporatized colonial governance both as administrators and military personnel. Through them, the Company as a governing body perpetrated many atrocities (Falola, 2009). In 1886, the same year it received its charter from the British Crown, the RNC established what it called the Royal Niger Constabulary, comprising an army and naval forces. The atrocities the Company perpetrated with these forces are widely documented (Falola, 2009). In a bid to monopolize trade in the area, the RNC's army forcefully brought most kingdoms in the region under its management. The order of violence put in place by such colonial companies as the RNC is most aptly captured in what Mbembe (2001) has described as colonial rationality in the context of French colonial rule in Africa. Colonial rationality suggests a kind of rule by total subjection, derived from the notion of sovereign rights. The company was a limited liability, which also meant that its agents bore no responsibilities for any action in pursuance of the company's charter rights. Treaties and laws issued by the limited liability company were meant to govern and exploit, at will, those under absolute subjection. The colonial company was above the law; it was the "Leviathan state."

The insistence on corporate profits and imperial savings by the colonial machinery meant that even indirect rule by natives, a system purported to have been a blueprint of effective colonial administration, may have been an outcome of an imperial fiscal austerity policy, which made it easy for colonial corporate governors to govern with little funds and with few people, and hence minimize cost (Nwabughuogu, 1981, p. 67-68). Even this decision to have a formal colony of indirect rule through natives was a last resort to rescue imperial trading from a new set of political obstacles. For example, the French and the Germans "were changing the rules of colonial administration in Africa, and the signing of treaties and bribing of chiefs backed by some vague international stamp of approval were no longer sufficient to provide legal claim to an area" (Pearson, 1971, p. 75).

The operationalization of this corporatized inevitable logic of empire in Nigeria as explained above means that the RNC, its predecessor: the RAC, and its 1929 successor: the UAC all aspired to be not just "a state within a state," or "semi-sovereign status," or a "delegated sovereignty"; that is, a sort of "department of state" with "quasi-governmental powers." But also, they aspired to be and sometimes were the state, at least in Stern's (2008) conceptualization of what constitutes a "company state."

From the foregoing—and in our attempt to situate present socio-political challenges in postcolonial Nigeria in the context of the colonial corporatization of governance—it is crucial to ask: how did this corporatization of colonial governance impact the social and political life of “Nigerians” in the postcolonial era? Here, we might remember Chatterjee’s (1986) contention that nationalism is not just a “derivative discourse” in postcolonial setting such as Nigeria. The challenge of contemporary nationhood in ex-colonies is that its salience came from the colonial encounter, in the case of this article, the corporatized colonial enterprise. It is safe, therefore, to assert that the eventual amalgamation or the creation of Nigeria was also first an economic venture before it was political. The Lord Selborne Report of 1898, in offering recommendations on the making of Nigeria noted, “we are of opinion that the Niger cannot form the dividing line; both banks of the Niger must be under one jurisdiction on account of the international questions which will probably arise in connection with the use of the river” (Uzoigwe, 1968, p. 468). The “international questions” in the report very likely referred to trade and the associated profits that came with it. Economic interests and the resulting corporate profits were thus at the very heart of the creation of Nigeria.

The impact of the corporatized governance of the Niger area was felt not only on local economics, it also unsettled or at best defined the political and cultural dynamics of colonial “Nigerians” as well as the future Nigerian polity. Hermann (2011) illustrated how the need for monetization as a way of improving trade and making profits was imperial and supported by elite Nigerians (p. 396). These elites were to become the leaders of postcolonial Nigeria. Under the indirect rule of companies in Nigeria, corporatized imperial alliances with local peoples were so malleable, in pursuit of native legitimacy, that these collaborationist locals saw a need to look after their own economic interests in that corporatized process. In northern Nigeria, for example, political agents became primarily interested in searching for personal gain from the colonial administration (Afeadie, 1996). While they assisted communication and diplomacy with native authorities and gathered information for the colonial government, they also oversaw their own economic interests (Afeadie, 1996). In the southern protectorates, the economic interest of Britain and Lagosian merchants converged due to their mutual profit-making ventures (Hermann, 2011). They later agreed that the use of barter as a medium of exchange had dire economic consequences, and this led to the creation of a colonial government that legalized the pound as medium of exchange (Hermann, 2011).

In 1937, “the British colonial government awarded Shell and British Petroleum (BP) the total land area of Nigeria as an oil concession” with oil exportation starting in 1958 (Onimode, 1978, p. 210). The UAC, which in 1929 became a conglomerate of other colonial companies including the RNC, controlled commerce in West Africa and elsewhere until 1987 (Fieldhouse, 1994). Consequently, while Shell and BP eventually gave up the abovementioned oil concessions, some of these concessions went on to be owned by the American multinationals Gulf and Mobil (Onimode, 1978, p. 210). The economic motive behind the implementation of the above recommendation of the Selborne Report, and various profit-making arrangements and decisions which followed, may have “given rise to great difficulties for the future stability of Nigeria” (Uzoigwe, 1968, p. 468). Moreover, with Christian missionaries, “tribal” chiefs and educated Africans partaking in the imperial running of the Benue and Niger areas before 1914—and in the administration of colonial Nigeria after 1914 until 1960 as an industrial complex whose primary motive was profit—we have a basis to argue that first, colonial Nigeria was effectively run as a corporation, and second, that this primary economic foundation of contemporary Nigeria has led to corporate cultural, social, and political communities that find meaning in the creation of Nigeria not as a nation but as an imperial industrial machine.

### **Nigeria as Company-State: The Order of Postcolonial Violence**

Most often, the argument has been that colonialism—or in the context of this article, British colonialism—produced a disjointed nationhood due to autocratic “colonial policies” of an imperially orchestrated politico-historical blacksmithing: “simultaneous acts of ethnocultural splitting and joining” (Suleiman & Maiangwa, 2017). What we are sketching out in this article, however, is a rethink of the ideas of the (postcolonial) state that originated from corporatized colonial ideology. It is important, even if only conceptually, to ask what kinds of political, social and economic communities emerged through a colonial process that conceived the nation-state as a corporate, trading organization. By 1899 when the British Crown revoked the RNC’s charter and took on a more active role in the administration of its Nigerian territories, formerly independent kingdoms, nations, and peoples became effectively transformed into sub-units of a mega corporation. This takeover from the RNC by no means altered the already instituted corporate governmentality in colonial Nigeria. The organization of social, political and economic life along corporate or commercial lines continued. As discussed in the introduction, the well-known British colonial policy of indirect rule that assumedly used local authorities to govern was

only a pretext for what was rather a commercialist ideology that set up so-called local authorities as business managers. The use of these local rulers to collect taxes and levies, to manage labor, and implement the colonist's corporate laws and policies supports the claim that the colonized nation-state was at best "a company-state."

The violence that produced the company-state is the violence to corporatize politics, territory, human body, and resources. Corporatization also signalled the reorganization of the political order of pre-existing corporate royal powers. Importantly, we are not suggesting here that corporatization of the political originated solely from the RNC's activities in the late nineteenth century. Centuries of trade in human beings (through the slave trades) saw the transformation of sovereignties in what became Nigeria into corporate entities founded essentially on the exercise of violence as the order of trade. Empires and kingdoms (for example, the Benin, Oyo, Opobo, and Arochukwu kingdoms in Southern Nigeria, as well as the emirates of Kontagora, Kano, Sokoto, and Zaria in Northern Nigeria) had long transformed into trading states in which the political was coterminous with the commercial, and in which trading was the objective of governmentality. These sovereignties had their territories of influence and surrounding areas where they resourced trading items. Of course, the geographies of such corporatized politics changed regularly as wars and migrations altered their systems and conditions of subjections.

What colonial companies such as the RNC did was essentially to incorporate these various corporations into a capitalist monopoly. The company-state was thus a product of a chaotic jumble of corporate sovereignties. Both during and after the official life of European colonization, this incorporated polity serves one key interest, notwithstanding the micro interests of its various units: the monopolization of material, political, and social economy. This monopolizing element of the company-state is what we sketch in this article as a hallmark sponsoring simultaneously the advance and dissolution of the Nigerian company-state in the postcolony.

What is at stake here is not simply how colonial companies played a vital role in the organization of what became Nigeria. It is also not only how economic motives drove colonial companies in their quest for absolute profit to use violence on colonized populations. Rather, it is the conditions of organized social and political life emerging from this colonial indirect rule by companies. The first proposition to note is that the colonial rationality that produced the

“Nigerian state” conceived it as an industrial complex not as a nation, as a company-state not as a civil entity. Conceived thus as a business, social and political life became organized around the exploitation and production of labor community for the colonist. Local structures of relationship and governance were either undermined or appropriated for commercial gains. Civil life became transformed into a salaried condition in which “‘salary-earner,’ ‘citizen,’ and ‘client’ reciprocally reproduced one another or, at any event, participated in a single structure of conscious representations well described by what has been called *politique du ventre*, ‘the politics of the belly’” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 75; Bayart, 2009).

The second proposition is that the nation as a corporate entity suggests that what constitutes a nation becomes less the structures of social life that are organized around the wellbeing of members. It is rather the organization of society as business, institutionalized around, and designed toward, one aim: commerce. It is the corporatization of living. This corporatization of living is not only suggestive of the commodificatory practices of capitalism on life. In addition, the corporatization of a polity sets up a system of competitiveness that works towards the dissolution of the nation. And nothing expresses the conditions of this corporatization of nationhood more than the unresolved question of the subject of/with rights deriving from colonialism: what/who constitutes the subject of rights in the postcolony. The subject has prerogatives to rule over others, to define others, to enact laws, to represent others, to make meaning, and to control others.

The continued order of large-scale violence witnessed since so-called postcolonial times and particularly in twenty-first-century Nigeria bears all the trappings of the corporatized reality highlighted above. The first decade of the twenty-first century, for example, witnessed three major kinds of large-scale violence in the country. The first is the rise of radical militancy in the Niger-Delta region, the second is structural or indirect violence manifested through high-level political corruption, and the third disguises as ethnoreligious agitations.

At the centre of militancy in the Niger-Delta region is control over proceeds accruing from crude oil exploitation. El-Khawas (2012) explained that the root of the Niger Delta crisis, “lie in the long-term exploitation of the region’s human and natural resources. It was slavery in the pre-colonial period, palm oil during the British rule, and now [crude] oil” (p. 112). The Niger-Delta region has been a hub of mass violence based on the changing demands for resources that nature and history somehow conspire to place in the region. As a coastal region,



the slave trade thrived in this region, reshaping its political and social organizations. From the mid-nineteenth century, the demand for palm oil and kernel (resources also found in enormous quantities in the region) and control over some of these trade commodities led to intense crises between different competing interests. Particularly between the RNC and the corporatized political sovereignties in the region, a popular instance was the 1895 attack on the RNC's port facilities at Akassa along the Oil Rivers by the Nembe people of Brass, and the brutal response by the RNC (Pearson, 1971, p. 75).

The rise of Niger-Delta militancy in the twenty-first century brings closer the continued influence of colonial companies in Nigeria—companies such as Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria. These militant agitations highlight “the multiple forms of *private indirect government*” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 67, emphasis in the original) described by Mbembe as constitutive of the violence of economics and the violence against the monopolistic order of the postcolonial state. At once, these militant groups are far from uniform. Their agitation is not essentially nationalistic. Rather, it is premised on resource control, shown in how militant groups attempt to use force to lay claims to economic resources and spaces of influence. While it may seem that these militant groups are violent in nature or are anti-government, it is likely that most of them were initially opposed to violence. However, as their grievances were not being addressed, they resorted to violence and turned it into an instrument of economic appropriation, challenging the state's monopoly on economic resources. For example, prior to his execution in the hands of the junta in Nigeria in 1995, the late environmentalist, Ken Saro Wiwa, led a non-violent movement known as the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). However, his execution and the continued repression of the rights of the Niger Delta people, saw the emergence of violent forms of activism including the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). In this exercise of confiscating resources, the groups become private sovereignties, able to participate in international market economies that provide them with the means to legitimize their agitation. Moreover, they provide or dramatize a sense of providing those under the sphere of their control with public administrative obligations and welfare that the state is supposed to provide. They are militant agitators, governments, and sovereign all at once. Thus, there is a sense to which we can argue that the continued militancy in the Niger Delta speaks more to outcomes of exploitative

corporatization of peoples and their environments than about people's innate propensity to violence.

Structural violence in Nigeria also emanated from this reality of corporate nationhood, manifested by a high level of political corruption, and Nigeria's dependence on and connivance with colonial companies. A prime example of such connivance was demonstrated in the Halliburton scandal. Haliburton, an American oil multinational corporation, was involved in an alleged scandal of paying over \$182 million to Nigerian high-profile politicians to secure a contract to build a \$4 billion Nigerian liquefied Natural Gas Plant in the Niger Delta region (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006). The Haliburton scandal in Nigeria brings closer not just the continued influence of colonial companies in Nigeria; it also "exacerbates the unrest associated with many parts of the postcolonial world and renders murky the geographies of crime and violence that configure popular perceptions of that world" (p. 8). The scandal also reveals a "complex north-south collaboration" (p. 8) and coloniality that verges on exploitation and corruption in the postcolony. This relationship is manifested in the continued alliance for state robbery forged by African postcolonial leaders, multinationals, and superpowers (Lumumba-Kasango, 2013). Moreover, the clamour for state power with the attendant violence, particularly during elections and in the post-election periods, clearly illustrates the absence of "nationhood" and speaks more about Nigeria's skewed leadership orientation and propensity towards state robbery than about an honest or selfless desire to govern.

The seemingly ethnoreligious violence identified with such groups as *Boko Haram* in northeast Nigeria operates from a similar order of corporatized political and social practice. It is not a mere coincidence that the rise of such private sovereignties disguised as ethnoreligious nationalisms overlaps with the deregulation of the market and the increasing privatization of the means of survival and coercion in twenty-first-century Nigeria. These violent tensions are not simply a response to the failures of the state. They are also suggestive of the increasingly deregulatory process of the incorporation cobbled together under British colonialism.

Thus, the contribution of this paper lies in its conceptualization and unraveling of the historicity of Nigeria's social vices, which, to our reckoning, subsist in the ongoing corporatization of the country. The commercialist foundation of Nigeria makes thinking about nationhood and social relations beyond economics and commerce difficult. Consequently, social and political structures of governance and civic life are organized around corporate governance.

And this corporate governance thrives essentially on violent forms, be they in the exploitation and expropriation of resources, the pollution of environment, unbridled greed, the contests over rights to territories of influence, and the institutionalization of corruption as a cultural norm. This conceptualization of violence in Nigeria's postcolony fits nicely into the structural mode of violence described by Johan Galtung (2007). The idea of structural violence explains how the forces of conflict—in this instance, commercial exploitation—are built into the social structure of a society, where a steeped and curious division exists between those of higher and lower strata of society. The latter are described as the dangerous classes due to the possibility that they may one day call into question the injustices of their society in rebellious ways (p. 18).

### **Conclusion: Rethinking Corporate Nationhood and the Order of Peace**

We have argued that Nigeria was never envisioned to become a nation. Rather, the British acquired the colony by force through charter companies, and since then, it has existed as an acquired industrial complex (Falola, 2009). The corporatized "state" birthed unprecedented levels of violence and social disintegration in the postcolony. The challenge then is to figure out how populations, imagined as elements of a corporation, can disentangle themselves from this exploitative trap and re-envision a more meaningfully reality. To usefully engage this process, there is a need to understand the root of the "Nigeria problem." One of the proponents of the field of Peace and Conflict Studies, John Burton (1997), has argued that the constructive resolution of conflict will make no sense if insights gained as to the roots of such conflicts are not deciphered and used to anticipate and prevent the onset of future conflicts.

What lies at the roots of most conflicts in Nigeria is not primordialism, state-failure, greed-grievance, direct invasion of colonialists, or even Lord Lugard's pronouncement of the creation of Nigeria in 1914. Rather, it is the prior imperial use of companies to secure and govern territories. We argue that redressing the wrongs of the past hinges on understanding present-day Nigeria, not as a nation but as a corporate entity. Arguably, this knowledge can be useful in the creation of new workable reality in Nigeria based either on the idea of nationhood or at least on some form of inclusive governance or citizenship, which must be tempered with the lived socio-cultural experiences of the governed.

We propose, therefore, a system of peacebuilding and societal restructuring based on the legitimate goals and agency of all parties involved. Galtung (2007) described this kind of peacebuilding as one that legitimizes the affected parties as agents in their own right who can

identify their needs and goals and work through the contradictions and differences between such goals without calling in experts from outside. This mode of peacebuilding or conflict transformation places enormous power and responsibility on the people affected by social injustices and violence. Ultimately, the issue of whether conflict-affected communities have “agency” in their own rights constitutes an interesting vista of research in the field of peace and conflict studies.

The field of peace and conflict studies can be a frontier in exploring forces of colonial oppression and injustices in which many societies remain entrapped. Critical and emancipatory peacebuilding holds enormous potential for rethinking the terms of violent relations in Nigeria. In the Nigerian case, this rethinking would entail a serious mental effort of self-criticism and appraisal. Galtung (2007) explained that “mental task would be cognitive/emotional disobedience, refusing to structure the inner world in that polarized way, also identifying the negative in Self and the positive in Other. Avoiding the trap of Self-hatred combined with Other-love; that is only polarization in reverse, not reversed” (p. 29). He stated that a primary condition for this emancipatory peacebuilding to happen is by maintaining an open mind and developing the courage to believe, and take the risk to think, speak, and to act upon it (Galtung, 2007, p. 29). In the context of Nigeria, such actions might entail dialoguing with formerly condemned enemies including so-called terrorists and militants, creating peace education forums rooted in the socio-political history of the land, acknowledging and seeking apology for past wrongdoings, commemorating victims of violence, holding interfaith encounters, and pursuing justice for aggrieved communities in whatever form. Thinking through these practical steps can help formerly colonized societies to identify both historical and contemporary conditions of their oppression (internally or externally-inflicted). Through these steps, Nigerians can recreate meaningful structures and principles that resonate with their everyday reality.

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